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ABSTRACT

This user guide is part of a multimedia unit using an interdisciplinary approach with hands-on learning to motivate children to participate actively in their schools and local communities, and to experience the democratic process. This unit focuses on the concept of laws helping people to live together and how people help make the laws. Unit parts include: (1) video preview; (2) suggestions for using the unit; (3) getting ready to view the video; (4) video modeling lesson; (5) follow-up activities for primary, intermediate, and upper grade children; and (6) a bibliography for children and teachers. (EH)

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For Grades K-6

My America
Building a Democracy

CC

Available in English and Spanish

ED 404 264

How Our Laws Are Made

User Guide

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My America: Building a Democracy

GOALS

To help children:

- become familiar with the democratic process and active citizenship,
- recognize what it means to be a citizen in a multicultural society,
- build skills in communications and cooperation,
- recognize how laws are made and how a single vote and voice matter, and
- experience how caring and commitment build community.

FORMAT

MY AMERICA is a 12-unit series, consisting of:

- 15-20 minute videos
- User Guides
- Resource Directory Disks (MS-DOS & MAC)

Materials were designed by educators, for educators. An interdisciplinary approach to hands-on learning is used.

EDUCATIONAL CONTENT

The MY AMERICA kits motivate children to participate actively in their schools and local communities, and to experience the democratic process. The series attempts to demystify the government, explain how laws are made, and show how American democracy is always evolving. MY AMERICA combines elements of traditional civics and social studies curricula with techniques and activities that encourage children to participate and become involved. **Its underlying theme is: Democracy works best when everyone participates.**

MY AMERICA teaches in the voices of children in a way that respects their intelligence and natural curiosity.

THE VIDEOS

Each tape contains on-location documentaries, animation and historical illustration. A classroom modeling lesson encourages children to use their skills in reading, writing, listening, painting, singing and performing. The cooperative learning model is central to each video.

Videos are developed within the following framework:

Kid View: Children give thought-provoking, lively opinions on each topic.

Documentary: Historical context and current concerns are blended with examples of children making a difference in their communities. This section is rich in historical information and opens up a wide range of discovery possibilities.

Modeling Lesson: Educators and students develop an interdisciplinary activity designed to bring alive the educational objective of the video.

Wrap Up: The key concept is recapped from the diverse perspectives of both children and adults.

"Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world: indeed it's the only thing that ever has."

—Margaret Mead

PAUSE POINTS

The videotapes can be used in a variety of ways. Some educators use the tapes to teach three separate lessons on a concept. To facilitate this usage, a blackboard icon comes up between the Kid View, the Documentary and the Modeling Lesson, giving educators appropriate PAUSE POINTS during which to elaborate on concepts.

THE USER GUIDES

Guides provide multiple learning experiences, lesson plans and bibliographies built around social studies and citizenship themes. Suggested activities are interdisciplinary in approach and focus on skills in communication and cooperation.

RESOURCE DIRECTORY DISKS (MS-DOS & MAC)

MY AMERICA Resource Directory Disks include black-lined master activity sheets, samples of letters to parents and organizations, petitions, proclamations and press releases—all of which can be customized. Also included are a listing of additional resources, bibliographic references for students and teachers, historical documents, and curriculum correlations.

This icon 💾 indicates that additional material is available on the MY AMERICA Resource Directory Disk.

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How Our Laws Are Made

My America
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Educational objective:

To understand that we have laws to help people live together; to learn that in a democracy, the people help make the laws.

Student concept:

Who makes our laws? We do!

Video preview

Laws help groups of people live and work together in harmony. Children define what laws are and why we have them. We see a club of actively involved Florida children raise funds, petition, and lobby their governor to save and protect the manatees. The children try to get a law passed that would set speed limits for motorboats in areas where manatees swim. Children talk to Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginzberg about how she nurtures the ideal of equal justice under the law in her daily work interpreting the U.S. Constitution. A class starts on the road to making change by creating community action plans on specific social issues.

"Kids are the next generation, so they should help make laws by writing notes to their senator or their mayor."

—Fourth Grader
New York City

Suggestions for using "How Our Laws are Made"

As an Opening and/or Culminating Experience to a Unit of Study: The video and suggested activities are designed to supplement your existing social studies curriculum. They are highly motivating resources to introduce and engage students in understanding that in a democracy active citizens make the law of the land.

As an Individual Lesson: Suggested activities provide experiences to help children understand that active citizens commit energy to creating community action plans that sometimes lead to new legislation. Activities are divided into those appropriate for primary, intermediate and upper elementary school children.

As an Assembly Program: The children write their definition of a law on a 3 X 5 card and drop it in a container on the way into the auditiorium. The teacher/facilitator picks 10 definitions at random. The children who wrote them read their definitions to the group. Introduce the video.

My America
Building a Democracy

How Our Laws Are Made

Did You Know That?

There was a time when

- **Keeping a homing pigeon from flying away was against the law in New Jersey.**
- **Covering railroad tracks with soap was against the law in Mississippi.**
- **Singing out of tune was illegal in North Carolina.**

Find more unusual state laws in the MY AMERICA

Getting ready to view the video

In a democracy, active citizens take responsibility for nurturing the quality of life in their communities. When citizens believe they have the power to make positive social change, the democracy evolves and flourishes.

- On a chart or board, generate a list of the rules from one of the children's favorite games. Discuss how rules provide everyone with the same frame of reference and allow a game to flow fairly.
- Help the children compare the rules of a game with the laws of a country. Discuss their definitions of laws, why laws exist and who makes them. The children write their thoughts about these questions on 3 X 5 cards.
- Create a bulletin board of the people at home, in school, in the community and in the country who are responsible for making the laws by which the children and their family and friends live.

Key vocabulary: democracy, government, laws, decision, Supreme Court, the Congress, the President, citizen

Key phrases: "the greatest good for the greatest number", "equal justice under the law", "the three branches of government", "a government of the people, by the people, and for the people", "a Supreme Court Justice", "the Iroquois Great Law of Peace"

Video Modeling Lesson: Creating Action Plans

★Creating community actions plans begins with discussing how citizens function and participate in a democratic government. What does an active citizen do? Is it possible for one person to make a difference and create a new law or change an existing law?

★Emphasize that participation is the key to change in a democracy. Change begins when positive people work together on a common goal to make their world a better place. Brainstorm the social problems the children would like to address.

★Encourage the children to brainstorm effective ways of bringing attention to issues—for example, creating posters, writing petitions or letters to the President and/or members of Congress, designing a new kind of community center, or writing a press release.

★Children design possible solutions to each social problem and create model letters, petitions, art work and community building sites as stepping stones to positive change.

★Generate timelines for activities that bring these projects to life in the world outside the classroom. Encourage the children to contribute their specific talents and interests to the project.

★Each working group presents its plan to the class for feedback and celebration.

Modeling Lesson Materials: chart paper, magic markers, paper, pencils, clay, cardboard

"By using cooperative learning, the children explore the concept of active citizenship and social change. This engaging experience helps reinforce their critical thinking and problem solving skills."

—Kim Outerbridge
ModelingTeacher
PS 115
New York City

How Our Laws Are Made

My America
Building a Democracy

Follow-up activities for primary grade children

★Read from one of the books in the MY AMERICA Bibliography that explains how the Supreme Court functions in language and illustrations appropriate for young children. Ask the children why they think we have a Supreme Court. Who plays a role similar to a Supreme Court Justice in their lives? The children draw pictures of the nine justices and the building they work in.

★Laws or rules help people live together. The children vote on their favorite game. After the vote, use the top-rated game to illustrate how its rules determine game play and give all participants an equal opportunity to win. Play the game with the children. Play the game again, but ask two children to break one of the rules. What happens to the fair flow of the game? How do the other children feel when the game is not played fairly? Listen to their feelings. List them on a chart for easy reference. The children devise their own definitions of rules or laws and describe why rules and laws exist.

★Bring the children together to discuss rules for classroom behavior. What daily activity in the classroom needs a rule to keep the activity open, fair and easy for everyone? Let the children express their feelings about the issue. Why is the activity not fair in its present state? What needs to be changed? Where do you start to make the change? Who has the power to make and enforce the change? Collectively create a rule or law to help bring harmony to the activity. Draw comparisons between this process and the one used by judges.

Follow-up activities for intermediate grade children

★The Supreme Court Building is a monument to justice. Inside, however, real people interpret, review and make decisions about our laws. Take a neighborhood walk or trip with the children to the place in your city or town where people who make and/or interpret local laws work. Arrange for the children to visit these individuals. The children interview them with questions they develop before the visit. Later, the children write thank you notes or create drawings that express what they learned and how they feel about the experience.

★The Congress, the President and the Supreme Court form the three branches of government in the American democracy. Discuss how this separation of powers keeps one branch from becoming too powerful and oppressive. Brainstorm and list the people who function in a similar capacity in your city or town. Who writes the local law? Who enforces the local laws? Who interprets the local laws? Expand this activity to the state government and outline how it functions. Together, the children design a bulletin board to present this information to other classes.

"It is the job of all of us to keep the idea of equal justice under the law alive and well and to strive to make things more equal."

—Ruth Bader Ginzberg
Supreme Court Justice

Find It In The MY AMERICA

- **How to Contact Law Makers**
- **How to Contact Public Action Groups**
- **List of Unusual State Laws**

The full text of:

- **Iroquois Great Law of Peace**

My America
Building a Democracy

How Our Laws Are Made

"Laws make me feel secure that something is right and something is wrong and I know the difference."

—Fifth Grader
Florida

Follow-up activities for upper grade children

★The nine Supreme Court Justices wear special robes when they are hearing a case. Check the MY AMERICA Bibliography for books that show photographs of this garment. Children discuss how clothes affect the way we perceive people and the roles they play in our society. The children design a new robe for the Supreme Court Justice of the 21st century. See the MY AMERICA 💾 for an activity sheet.

★The Supreme Court hears cases in a courtroom in the Supreme Court Building. No cameras are allowed in this special room. Have the children close their eyes and imagine what this room looks like. Here are some questions to ask to start the process. How is this room furnished? What colors are the walls, floor and furniture? Does the room have windows? If so, how many? Do the windows catch the morning or the afternoon light? What kind of artificial light does the room have? How does the light affect the mood in the room?

Once the children's imaginations catch fire, they sketch a picture of the Supreme Court room. Send these illustrations to one of the Justices with a letter. Children may want to ask: "How does it feel to be a Supreme Court Justice?" "How did it feel to put on the robe for the first time?" "How does it feel to have all that responsibility?" Send a copy of these letters and illustrations to the MY AMERICA Newsletter for publication.

★ The national law-making process takes place in Washington, DC. Issues are debated and voted on in the U.S. Capitol before they become law. Check the MY AMERICA Bibliography for books that outline how the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate function. See the MY AMERICA 💾 for an easy way the children to find out who represents them in Washington. Each month the children take the time to express in writing what they think about the bills their representatives write and support. Once this relationship is initiated, the children will sense the power of being heard by the people who make laws and create change.

The MY AMERICA Newsletter publishes active citizenship projects and activities. Send your photos, stories, and videotapes to:

MY AMERICA Newsletter
c/o New Castle Communications
229 King Street
Chappaqua, NY 10514

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Check the MY AMERICA for additional books, resources and activity sheets.

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What Is a Flag?
A Pledge Is a Promise
Neighborhood and Community
Liberty and Justice
What Is an American?
The Story of the National Anthem
What Is a Democracy?
How Our Laws Are Made
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Resources available, AT NO CHARGE, when you purchase the entire multimedia series:
MY AMERICA Newsletter: published three times during the school year.
MY AMERICA Teacher Training Video: 10 classroom activities around civic issues.

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"In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations."

—The Great Law of the Six Nations
Iroquois Confederacy

About New Castle Communications, Inc.
MY AMERICA is published by New Castle Communications, Inc. The company is creating educational materials in video, print and computer software formats. New Castle Communications is committed to designing, producing and distributing multimedia materials that engage children and inspire them to get involved in their classrooms, schools and communities.

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